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ABSTRACT

The presentation strategies used in debates are as often a factor in the outcome as the content. Rudeness and humor are important considerations in examining the effect of various delivery styles at either the National Debate Tournament (NDT) or the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) debate. J. H. Howe has elaborated on some of the reasons that humor has not been used much in debates: (1) the NDT tradition has highly emphasized the used of evidence; and (2) debaters perceive an inadequacy in the use of humor. Howe best summarized his feelings on the issue of humor in 1981: "Above all, what the author believes to be an essential aspect of audience debating is the use of humor. As a factor of attention, humor has few equals." Other research suggests that humor should be personalized to the situation and should be used in situations where a debater can boost his or her credibility. Also, debaters should avoid humor that employs the "ad hominem" attack. Most critics would consider personal attacks as rude behavior. V. Patterson and D. Zarefsky contend that when faced with a less skilled opponent debaters should avoid being rude or arrogant. Also, M. Pfau, D. Thomas and W. Ulrich argue that sarcastic or overbearing treatment of an opponent is inappropriate conduct as far as most judges are concerned. Displaying a humane side is a more appropriate style. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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EFFECTS OF HUMOR AND RUDENESS ON JUDGES' DECISIONS OR "TAKE MY JUDGE PLEASE"

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Abstract

The issue of delivery has been an important pressing question in academic debate for some time. Little research has been conducted on the specific delivery techniques used in debates, namely humor and rudeness. This paper defined and examined humor in the debate round. Specific guidelines were developed to help debaters, coaches, and critics understand effective humor. This paper also defined and analyzed rudeness in the debate context. Again, specific recommendations were made to assist debaters in avoiding rudeness. Finally, this paper sought to advocate increased use of humor and the avoidance of rudeness through actions of the coach, the debate student, and the critic.

EFFECTS OF HUMOR AND RUDENESS ON JUDGES' DECISIONS OR "TAKE MY JUDGE PLEASE"

"There is no attempt to inject humor...into... American debate." (Howe; 1982; p. 1)

If you are rude in anyway I will give you awful points" (Pettus; 1991; p. 168)

The presentation strategies used in debates are as often a factor in the outcome as the content. Whether the presentation is a slower oratorical style or a more rapid paced debate, delivery can impact strategies of the opponent and the overall climate of the round. Much discussion has taken place over the most appropriate speaking rate, but little discussion of delivery has occurred beyond that issue. Both NDT and CEDA debate are currently perceived as having fairly similar patterns of delivery. Rudeness and humor are important considerations in examining the effect of various delivery styles on either NDT or CEDA debate.

Specifically, the issue of humor has not been thoroughly discussed in the scholarly literature on debate. Humor, though assumed to be a productive ethos building tactic, has not been widely studied in the debate community. Too little attention has been given to judges' perceptions

regarding humor, let alone judges' decisions based on humor. Initially, this paper seeks to explain effects of the use of humor in intercollegiate debate. Furthermore, this paper attempts to advocate the use of humor in intercollegiate debate with four distinct justifications.

While rudeness has been mentioned more often (and it's effects may well be more pronounced), very little research has been conducted on it's effects. Many judges warn that rudeness will result in undesirable outcomes, even empirical evidence seems to verify this claim. Rude delivery seems an especially important delivery aspect to study given the important ramifications on a potential debate. Perhaps more important is the underlying fear that if rudeness is uncontrolled then in some small way the argument field is harmed. To be explicit - if rudeness goes unchecked then there is a risk of serious harm to the activity. Thus, this paper also seeks to examine the relationship between perceived rudeness and ballot behavior of the critic and further seeks to discourage rudeness as a legitimate debate strategy.

Definitions and Analysis of Humor

There has been little writing on appropriate definitions for humor. Meyer (1990) confirmed this lack of understanding, "Humor is elusive as an appeal or as a state of mind, difficult to create or to pinpoint. It is therefore difficult to study" (p. 76). Meyer (1990) suggested that

humor cannot be detached from the context; if there is laughter there is potential for humor. Taylor (1974) argued that humor must be listener defined. According to Grimes (1955) the response to the humorous event is some manifestation of joy, either a smile or laughter. In other words, the message must be perceived by listeners as having humorous qualities. Meyer (1990) also contended that humor has affective or cognitive implications; humor results from either emotional or rational appeals.

Rather than attempting to define humor, Hudson (1979) argued that humor is best understood through the purposes it seeks to fulfill. First, humor can contrast two incongruent ideas (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972; Hudson, 1979, Meyer, 1990). Second, humor can involve superiority over other speakers (Hudson, 1979; Meyer 1990). Third, humor can be used to release strain and tension in the audience (Hudson, 1979; Meyer, 1990). Finally, humor can also be used to deal "with the environment" (Hudson, 1979 p. 18). Specifically, this type of humor can be used to create a link with an audience. Thus, humor is purposeful communicative action that elicits a favorable cognitive or affective response from listeners.

Popularity of Humor in the Debate Context

Howe (1982) suggested that humor was gravely lacking in debate. Howe lamented "Perhaps one of the cardinal sins of American educational debate has been its tendency to take itself too seriously" (1982; p. 1). Howe elaborated some of

the reasons why humor is used so infrequently in debates. Initially, Howe suggested that the NDT tradition had highly emphasized the use of evidence, "Humor, unfortunately, joined the [introduction] and [conclusion] parts of a complete speech as a sacrifice to the rush to read more cards and chalk up more 'points' in the debate" (p. 2). "...humor may have a far more telling effect on the outcome of the debate that twice the amount time spent producing more evidence would have" (p. 3). Second, Howe noted, was the debaters' perceived inadequacy in creating humor. Howe contended that because debaters were apprehensive about interjection humor it probably would not be widely performed. Debaters may not feel it is their role to be funny in the debate round (as opposed to exploring issues). Howe's third reason why humor is not widely used is the misunderstanding about what constitutes humor in a debate. The lack of humor in debate stems from the idea that debaters may not want to risk offending a critic with their humor. Howe contended "Let it be conceded that there are some judges that are so sober-sided as to disparage any humorous sally, but human beings stand alone... in their ability to laugh, and most judges are human" (p. 2). Howe's claim has truth even today according to research conducted by Brey (1990).

In comparison of NDT and CEDA judges Allen and Dowdy (1984) found that CEDA judges tended to list issues of

delivery more important than NDT judges. Specifically, Allen and Dowdy found that the CEDA judges mentioned courtesy and humor more often than their NDT counterparts did. Speaking specifically about CEDA, Weiss (1985) suggested that an audience finding humor and effective means of influencing a debate should not be put down, in many ways humor gives meaning to argumentation. Relatedly, Hanson (1988), in his study of college students' perceptions of good and bad judges, found that a sense of humor was a trait associated with a good judge. Hanson makes the case very apparent in that all participants (coach/critic as well as the student) like to be entertained in the forensics context. In an analysis of judging philosophies, Brey (1990) indicated that some judges in CEDA prefer the injection of some wit and humor into the debate round, but no indication was given on the popularity of the desire.

These authors seem to imply that humor, though desired, is not used as widely as one might expect. Howe (1981, 1982) and Weiss (1984) conclude that debate has become more evidence oriented and has in turn sacrificed the opportunity for humor. Humor as a facet of delivery has been slighted in favor of logical and evidenciary appeals. Allen and Dowdy (1984) and Brey (1990) contend that the use of humor is an important consideration when judges consider delivery.

Prescriptive Guidelines for Humor in Debate

Howe (1981) contended that debate is not a stand-up routine, "the clever expression, the humorous turn of phrase, the quick one-liner, even the "pun" can be productive methods of creating humor. Howe best summarized his feelings on the issue of humor in 1981, "Above all, what the author believes to be an essential aspect of audience debating is the use of humor. As a factor of attention, humor has few equals" (p. 2). While Howe openly admits that the British style of "heavy handed" ad hominem attacks are not appropriate, he clearly suggested that humor should be interjected more often in debate.

Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) recommended that humor should be used when possible to create a more personalized and informal context. They cautioned that humor must be in good taste and should not be at an opponent's expense. The implication of the Patterson and Zarefsky research is that humor can cross the bounds of reasonability if the humor unnecessarily derogates an opponent. It seems that humor that crossed that threshold would be likely perceived as rudeness.

Reinard (1991) suggested that humor can be an effective tool for arguers especially to enhance your credibility and arouse interest in your arguments. However, the use of humor according to Reinard is not without risk. Generally humor is not more effective as a refutational strategy than serious refutation and the effects of humor are usually more subtle.

But in situations where the receiver is favorable to the position, humor can increase credibility (Reinard, 1991).

Humor should be personalized to the situation (Howe, 1981, 1982; Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983) and should be used to in situations where a debater can boost their credibility (Reinard, 1991). Debaters should attempt to interject humor that avoids the ad hominem attack, and hence, is perceived as rude. However, humor should capitalize on the situation and the inherent tension between conflicting positions.

Humor emphasizing Hudson's purpose of contrasting two incongruent ideas seems perfectly appropriate for the debate context, especially because of the frequent likelihood that debaters have contradictory positions. Of course this type of humor should not be an attack on the opponent, only a commentary on the positions. Second, Hudson suggested that humor can involve superiority., that is , humor can put down an opponent or oneself. It seems that this type of humor could be the most problematic because if one opponent puts down another it is likely to be perceived as an ad hominem attack. Humor that puts oneself down can deny important credibility for the debater. Humor that explicitly places one opponent over another should still be used with caution even if the team has little to loose. Bartanen and Frank (1991) appropriately reminded that attack on the person is likely to be perceived as rude, but attacking the argument is much more appropriate. Likewise, humor that helps to

release strain in the debate, Hudson's third purpose, should be seen as beneficial. Reinard commented on the idea that humor should increase credibility, humor that specifically decreases stress and tension for the critic could likely increase the perceived credibility of the debater. Hudson's fourth purpose, dealing with connecting the environment with the audience, seems perfectly appropriate given the writings of Howe (1981, 1982) and Patterson and Zarefsky (1983). Humor that allows a debater to put the round in context should be favorably received especially since it does not demean the other team.

In many ways the use of humor is only marginally distinguishable from rudeness. Thus, further analysis of rudeness should illuminate the relationship between the related communicative strategies.

Definition and Analysis of Rudeness

As indicated the humor literature verbal aggression can occur when personal attacks overshadow the issues. Pettus (1991) also concluded that most critics would consider personal attack as rude behavior. Reinard (1991) discussed the process of verbal aggression suggesting that as the disagreement grows the arguers tend to gather some breathing room. If that strategy does not reduce the immediacy then interactants move closer together and the verbal attack escalates. Other topics unrelated to the original dispute are drawn into the discussion. As the process further

escalates the participants raise their voices and are likely to interrupt each other in an attempt to talk over the other person. The next stage, according to Reinard, is the verbal fight which is "attacking another person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain" (p. 379). Language becomes more formal, but insulting, as argument is left behind. In the final stage, language degenerates into ad hominem attacks on the person likely including profanity.

Rudeness in the Debate Context

Beyond the elaboration on verbal aggression little research has operationalized rudeness applicable to the debate context. Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) contended that when faced with a less skilled opponent debaters should avoid being rude or arrogant. These authors further contended that overkill is not appropriate and that generous, reasonable behavior tends to be more appropriate. Weiss (1985) suggested that offensive debate would not look like effective debate to an audience. Pfau, Thomas, and Ulrcih (1987) argued that sarcastic or overbearing treatment of the opponent was inappropriate conduct to many judges. "Debaters must display courteous and respectful attitudes toward one another. Debate is not a contest of personal intimidation, but of the clash of ideas" (p. 309). Pfau et al. further elaborated that judges do not respond well if your are disrespectful of them.

More recently, Bartanen and Frank (1991) contended that displaying a humane side is a more appropriate style. "Being humane in using language simply means attacking the opposing claim rather than the opposing debater" (Bartanen & Frank, 1991, p. 97). They further elaborated suggesting that debate as a game is only part of the debate process and not become an end of itself. Pettus (1991) analyzed the judging philosophies from the 1988 National Debate Tournament finding several judges concerned with rudeness in debate rounds. Pettus found that over one-half of the judges commented that rudeness was not appropriate in the debate round. Pettus cited one judge "I am... disturbed by the trend in debate recently towards rudeness in rounds. This consists of snide remarks during cross-ex[amination], condescending questions and answers, laughing and talking loudly during the other teams speaking time."

Prescriptive Guidelines for Rudeness in Debate

The authors that take up the issue of rudeness seem to point to two general implications. First, delivery strategies that attack an opponent are generally inappropriate. Bartanen and Frank (1991) as well as Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) suggested that an attack on the opponent is a less desirable form of strategy. Pettus certainly seemed to suggest that rudeness, though widely occurring, is not entirely popular in the NDT community. In the CEDA community, where delivery issues are even more

important (Allen & Dowdy, 1984) the occurrence of rudeness is an important consideration.

Second, the incidence of rudeness in a debate can to some extent be influenced by the occurrence of humor. This relationship could work both ways. Debates with much humor could easily incorporate disparaging remarks about the other team. As indicated earlier, several authors find these personal ad hominem attacks inappropriate. Relatedly, debate round where both teams have so little humor that rudeness (and eventually hostility) is enacted by virtue of the lack of humor is equally inappropriate. In this situation, constructive humor could be an effective device that could defuse the tension, and thus decrease the hostility between the debaters. In essence, the humor would work to allow the debaters to 'lighten up' a little.

Enacting Humor and Avoiding Rudeness

In terms of the responsibility to promote a more humorous debate round, the coach and the student share some joint burden. As with any other delivery technique, humor and rudeness can be coached. Each coach should consider the appropriateness of the humor and rudeness, and work to make those standards clear to debaters. Without question, a great majority of responsibility to entertain rather than outrage a critic lies in the hands of the individual debater. As Patterson and Zarefsky noted, humor must be appropriate to each debate; it must be personalized. Each debater must make

choices about their desire to be humorous or rude. As with issue selection, choices of one-liners or puns or superiority attempts falls entirely in the hands of the individual enacting them. What will eventually be presented is a delivery strategy that has been coached, that meets the needs of the occasion, and allows for the debater to have fun. The third party of the debate, the critic, also has responsibility to promote humor. According to Brey (1990), judges want to hear more humor in debate. These reported preferences should turn into ballot behavior that rewards humor that is appropriate and denies excessive rudeness. As each of us has heard before, in many ways the responsibility of the individual debate round lies with the critic that signs each ballot. Understanding and determining individual thresholds of humor and rudeness are important steps to becoming a critic that is concerned about maintaining an activity that is enjoyable for students, coaches, and the next critic. Denying the use of humor or avoiding action on rudeness only reinforces that students do not have to make the activity entertaining. The slippery slope effect eventually takes us to a point where few enjoy the activity, and the ones that do enjoy being mean spirited are the ones we really do not want around the activity anyway.

Conclusions

One of the best experiences that I ever had with humor was with a critic in the spring of 1985. We had debated for

this judge a couple of times and were relatively comfortable with his paradigm. This critic wa deeply interested logic, evidence, effective argument, but also had the ability to have a good time ribbing us about our obvious lack of neck apparel. During the CEDA Nationals tournament that spring he was interviewed by the Wichita Eagle and revealed that the "tie paradigm" was how he liked to view debate. By implication he warned us that debate should never loose sight of students participating to have fun, and he wanted to insure that aspect of the activity.

I believe that the same warning should be echoed today. As the push for evidence and the overall competitiveness of

intercollegiate debate increases, the students' ability to have a good time should never be sacrificed. Without the ability to have fun the activity will become but a collection of very informative speakers with little to offer in real human skills. Humor, as Hudson noted, attempts to create a link with the audience. If humorous communicative action is extinguished by critics that are too interested in the logico-rational discourse to understand that humor is a compelling motivator of human action, then our activity has lost something very significant. Humor is too real-world for us to let it slip through our judging paradigms as just another whine of people interested in delivery. Rudeness, though real-world too, is communicative action that should be deemphasized. Humor may be the one best way for coaches, students, and critics to bring debate to a more enjoyable and entertaining plateau.

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